

# Military Sexual Trauma

---

## *What is military sexual trauma (MST)?*

Military sexual trauma, or MST, is the term used by VA to refer to experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that a Veteran experienced during his or her military service. The definition used by the VA comes from Federal law (Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D) and is “psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training.” Sexual harassment is further defined as “repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character.”

More concretely, MST includes any sexual activity where a Servicemember is involved against his or her will -- he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied better treatment in exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities; and threatening and unwelcome sexual advances. The identity or characteristics of the perpetrator, whether the Servicemember was on or off duty at the time, and whether he or she was on or off base at the time do not matter. If these experiences occurred while an individual was on active duty or active duty for training, they are considered by VA to be MST.



## *How common is MST?*



VA's national screening program, in which every Veteran seen for health care is asked whether he or she experienced MST, provides data on how common MST is among Veterans seen in VA. National data from this program reveal that about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men respond “yes,” that they experienced MST, when screened by their VA provider. Although rates of MST are higher among women, because there are so many more men than women in the military, there are actually significant numbers of women and men seen in VA who have experienced MST.

It's important to keep in mind that these data speak only to the rate of MST among Veterans who have chosen to seek VA health care; they cannot be used to make an estimate of the actual rates of sexual assault and harassment experiences among all individuals serving in the U.S. Military. Also, although Veterans who respond “yes” when screened are asked if they are interested in learning about MST-related services available, not every Veteran who responds “yes” necessarily needs or is interested in treatment. MST is an experience, not a diagnosis, and Veterans' current treatment needs will vary.

---

## How can MST affect Veterans?

MST is an experience, not a diagnosis or a mental health condition, and as with other forms of trauma, there are a variety of reactions that Veterans can have in response to MST. The type, severity, and



duration of a Veteran's difficulties will all vary based on factors like whether he/she has a prior history of trauma, the types of responses from others he/she received at the time of the MST, and whether the MST happened once or was repeated over time. Although the reactions men and women have to MST are similar in some ways, they may also struggle with different issues. Race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other cultural variables can also affect the impact of MST.

Although trauma can be a life-changing event, people are often remarkably resilient after experiencing trauma. Many individuals recover without professional help; others may generally function well in their life, but continue to experience some level of difficulties or have strong reactions in certain situations. For some Veterans, the experience of MST may continue to affect their mental and physical health in significant ways, even many years later. Some of the experiences both female and male survivors of MST may have include:

**Strong emotions:** feeling depressed; having intense, sudden emotional reactions to things; feeling angry or irritable all the time

**Feelings of numbness:** feeling emotionally 'flat'; difficulty experiencing emotions like love or happiness

**Trouble sleeping:** trouble falling or staying asleep; disturbing nightmares

**Difficulties with attention, concentration, and memory:** trouble staying focused; frequently finding their mind wandering; having a hard time remembering things

**Problems with alcohol or other drugs:** drinking to excess or using drugs daily; getting intoxicated or "high" to cope with memories or emotional reactions; drinking to fall asleep

**Difficulty with things that remind them of their experiences of sexual trauma:** feeling on edge or 'jumpy' all the time; difficulty feeling safe; going out of their way to avoid reminders of their experiences

**Difficulties in relationships:** feeling isolated or disconnected from others; abusive relationships; trouble with employers or authority figures; difficulty trusting others

**Physical health problems:** sexual difficulties; chronic pain; weight or eating problems; gastrointestinal problems

Although posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is commonly associated with MST, it is not the only diagnosis that can result from MST. For example, VA medical record data indicate that in addition to PTSD, the diagnoses most frequently associated with MST among users of VA health care are depression and other mood disorders, and substance use disorders.

Fortunately, people can recover from experiences of trauma, and VA has effective services to help Veterans do this.

---

## How has VA responded to the problem of MST?

VA is strongly committed to ensuring that Veterans have access to the help they need in order to recover from MST.

- Every VA health care facility has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs. He or she may also be aware of state and federal benefits and community resources that may be helpful.
- Recognizing that many survivors of sexual trauma do not disclose their experiences unless asked directly, VA health care providers ask every Veteran whether he or she experienced MST. This is an important way of making sure Veterans know about the services available to them.
- All treatment for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST is provided free of charge.
- To receive free treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST, Veterans do not need to be service connected (or have a VA disability rating). Veterans may be able to receive this benefit even if they are not eligible for other VA care. Veterans do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.
- MST-related services are available at every VA medical center and every facility has providers knowledgeable about treatment for the aftereffects of MST. MST-related counseling is also available through community-based Vet Centers. Services are designed to meet Veterans where they are at in their recovery, whether that is focusing on strategies for coping with challenging emotions and memories or, for Veterans who are ready, actually talking about their MST experiences in depth.
- Nationwide, there are programs that offer specialized sexual trauma treatment in residential or inpatient settings. These are programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support.
- To accommodate Veterans who do not feel comfortable in mixed-gender treatment settings, some facilities have separate programs for men and women. All residential and inpatient MST programs have separate sleeping areas for men and women.



In addition to its treatment programming, VA also provides training to staff on issues related to MST, including a mandatory training on MST for all mental health and primary care providers. VA also engages in a range of outreach activities to Veterans and conducts monitoring of MST-related screening and treatment, in order to ensure that adequate services are available.

## How can Veterans get help?

For more information, Veterans can speak with their existing VA health care provider, contact the MST Coordinator at their nearest VA Medical Center, or contact their local Vet Center. A list of VA and Vet Center facilities can be found at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) and [www.vetcenter.va.gov](http://www.vetcenter.va.gov). Veterans should feel free to ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if it would make them feel more comfortable.

Veterans can also learn more about VA's MST-related services online at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp) and see video clips with the recovery stories of Veterans who have experienced MST at <http://maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma>.

## Quick Facts About VA's Health Care Services for Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uses the term “military sexual trauma” (MST) to refer to experiences of **sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment** experienced while on federal active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training.
- The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has a range of **outpatient, inpatient, and residential services** available to assist Veterans in their recovery from MST. At many VHA facilities, Active Duty personnel can also receive these MST-related services.
- All treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST is provided **free of charge**. This includes outpatient, inpatient, residential, and pharmaceutical treatment.
- To receive this free MST-related care, Veterans do not need to be service connected (that is, have a VA disability rating\*) – **eligibility for MST-related health care is independent of receipt of other VA benefits**. Veterans may be able to receive free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. For example, there are no length of service or income requirements to receive MST-related care. Veterans do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.

### *Specific MST-Related Services Available Through the Veterans Health Administration*

- Every VA health care facility has a designated MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues. This person can help Veterans find and access VA services and programs.
- Every VA medical center has providers knowledgeable about MST and provides MST-related mental health outpatient services. Services available include formal psychological assessment and evaluation; psychiatry; and individual and group psychotherapy. Specialty programs target problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, depression, and homelessness. MST-related counseling is also available at VHA's community-based Vet Centers.
- For Veterans who need more intensive treatment, many VHA facilities offer residential programming. A number of these residential programs focus specifically on MST or have specialized MST tracks.
- VHA also has inpatient programs available for acute care needs (e.g., psychiatric emergencies and stabilization, medication adjustment).

**For more information, please contact the MST Coordinator at your nearest VA Medical Center or visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp).**

**A list of VHA facilities can be found at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).**



**VA** Defining  
**HEALTH CARE** EXCELLENCE  
in the 21st Century



 VA Cares About  
Military Sexual Trauma

*\*Note:* the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) handles claims for compensation for injuries or disabilities that began or got worse during military service. More information about filing an MST-related disability claim is available at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/MST.pdf>

April, 2015



## DISABILITY COMPENSATION

## MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

### DISABILITY COMPENSATION FOR CONDITIONS RELATED TO MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST)

Disabilities determined by VA to be related to your military service can lead to monthly non-taxable compensation, enrollment in the VA health care system, a 10-point hiring preference for federal employment, and other important benefits. Ask your VA representative or Veterans Service Organization representative about Disability Compensation, Pension, Health Care, Caregiver Program, Career Services, Educational Assistance, Home Loan Guaranty, Insurance and/or Dependents and Survivors Benefits.

Some Veterans may have experienced sexual trauma while serving in the military. These kinds of experiences can affect Veterans' mental and physical health, even many years later. Veterans can apply for disability compensation for any current difficulties that are related to their service, including difficulties related to MST.

#### HOW DOES VA DEFINE MST?

MST is defined by Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D as "psychological trauma resulting from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training." Sexual harassment is defined as "repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character."

#### ARE VETERANS GRANTED DISABILITY COMPENSATION FOR MST?

Veterans are not granted compensation for the traumatic event itself, but can be granted disability compensation for conditions that result from MST.

Disabilities determined by VA to be related to your military service can lead to monthly non-taxable compensation, enrollment in the VA health care system, a 10-point hiring preference for federal employment and other important benefits. Ask your VA representative or Veterans Service Organization representative about Disability Compensation, Pension, Health Care, Caregiver Program, Career Services, Educational Assistance, Home Loan Guaranty, Insurance and/or Dependents and Survivors' Benefits.



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs



---

## **CAN YOU DEVELOP POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) OR OTHER MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS AS A RESULT OF MST?**

Yes. Exposure to any trauma can potentially result in PTSD or another mental health disorder. PTSD is the most common mental health diagnosis related to experiencing MST.

## **WHAT EVIDENCE CAN SUPPORT A DISABILITY CLAIM FOR PTSD AS A RESULT OF MST?**

Department of Defense forms used in reporting incidents of sexual assault or harassment, as well as investigative reports during military service are direct evidence to support these claims. However, VA knows that events involving sexual trauma are not always officially reported. Therefore, for PTSD claims related to MST VA has relaxed the evidentiary requirements and looks for “markers” (i.e., signs, events, or circumstances) that provide some indication that the traumatic event happened. These include, but are not limited to:

- Records from law enforcement authorities, rape crisis centers, mental health counseling centers, hospitals, or physicians
- Pregnancy tests or tests for sexually transmitted diseases
- Statements from family members, roommates, fellow Servicemembers, clergy members, or counselors
- Requests for transfer to another military duty assignment
- Deterioration in work performance
- Substance abuse
- Episodes of depression, panic attacks, or anxiety without an identifiable cause
- Unexplained economic or social behavioral changes
- Relationship issues, such as divorce
- Sexual dysfunction

## **VA RELAXED THE STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE FOR COMBAT RELATED PTSD. ARE THE STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE FOR MST – RELATED PTSD CLAIMS MORE STRINGENT THAN OTHER PTSD CLAIMS?**

No. In fact, VA relaxed its evidentiary standard for disability claims related to MST in 2002 to ensure all available evidence supporting these claims is considered. Because military service records may lack corroborating evidence that a stressful event occurred, VA regulations make clear that evidence from non-military sources may be used to corroborate the Veteran’s account of the MST. Further, when direct evidence of an MST is not available, VA may request a medical opinion to consider a Veteran’s account and any “markers” to corroborate the occurrence of the MST event as related to current PTSD symptoms.



## **CAN PREVIOUSLY DENIED MST RELATED PTSD DISABILITY CLAIMS BE RE-EVALUATED?**

Yes. Increased awareness of MST issues resulted in special training beginning in December 2011 for all VA regional office personnel who process MST-related claims and the mental health clinicians conducting the examinations related to these claims. This ongoing training focuses on discovering “marker” evidence to support the claim. VA wants all Veterans who filed MST-related PTSD claims before December 2011 to receive the benefits of this nationwide training. If your claim was submitted before that date and denied, you can request a re-evaluation from your local VA regional office.

## **WHAT DO VETERANS NEED TO DO TO GET A PREVIOUSLY DENIED MST-RELATED PTSD DISABILITY CLAIM RE-EVALUATED?**

Veterans who want VA to review their previously denied MST-related PTSD claim can start by contacting their regional office, calling 1-800-827-1000 or logging into their free eBenefits account at [www.eBenefits.va.gov](http://www.eBenefits.va.gov).

## **CAN VETERANS PROVIDE NEW INFORMATION FOR A RE-EVALUATION OF A PREVIOUSLY DENIED MST-RELATED PTSD DISABILITY CLAIM?**

Yes. VBA will accept new evidence to be reviewed when a claim is re-evaluated. It's best to send any new evidence at the same time as you request a re-evaluation. Veterans Service Organizations, as well as MST specialists and/or Women Veterans Coordinators available at every VA regional office, can help you determine what type of information is best to submit.

## **DO I NEED TO BE SERVICE CONNECTED FOR MY CONDITIONS RELATED TO MST TO GET TREATMENT?**

No. VA provides free health care for physical and mental health conditions related to experiences of MST. No documentation of the MST experiences or disability compensation rating is required. Some Veterans may be able to receive this free MST-related health care even if they are not eligible for other VA care.

## **HOW CAN YOU APPLY FOR DISABILITY COMPENSATION?**

You can apply for disability compensation by completing [VA Form 21-526, Veteran's Application for Compensation and/or Pension](#). You may also apply online at [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov), or you can appoint an accredited Veterans Service Officer (VSO) to assist you. Male and female MST coordinators are available at every VA regional office to assist Veterans filing claims related to personal assault or MST. You can call 1-800-827-1000, and VA will put you in touch with an MST coordinator, or you can email the MST coordinator at your local regional office from the list of



---

coordinators located at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/mstcoordinators.asp>. For information about MST-related treatment, visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp).





[SITE MAP \[A-Z\]](#)[Health](#)[Benefits](#)[Burials & Memorials](#)[About VA](#)[Resources](#)[News Room](#)[Locations](#)[Contact Us](#)

I AM A...

[Pre-Discharge](#)[Compensation](#)[Compensation Home](#)[Types of Compensation](#)[▼ Types of Claims](#)[Types of Claims Page](#)[Post-Service](#)[Pre-Discharge](#)[Special](#)[► Evidence Requirements](#)[Effective Dates](#)[Claims Process](#)[Fully Developed Claims](#)[Apply](#)[Benefit Rates](#)[Education & Training](#)[Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment](#)[Home Loans](#)[Life Insurance](#)[Pension](#)[Special Groups](#)[Services](#)[Applying for Benefits](#)[Locations](#)[VBA Claims Transformation](#)[VBA Performance](#)[Media and Publications](#)[About VBA](#)[VA](#) » [Veterans Benefits Administration](#) » [Pre-Discharge](#) » Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD)

## Pre-Discharge

### Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD)

BDD allows a Servicemember to submit a claim for disability compensation 60 to 180 days prior to separation, retirement, or release from active duty or demobilization. BDD can help you receive VA disability benefits sooner, with a goal of within 60 days after release or discharge.

#### Eligibility

BDD requires a minimum of 60 days to allow sufficient time to complete the medical examination process (which may involve multiple specialty clinics) prior to separation from service. If you are closer than 60 days to separation from service, you can submit a [Quick Start](#) claim. BDD is available nationwide and open to all Servicemembers on full time active duty, including members of the National Guard and Reserve. Members of the Coast Guard may also participate.

Requirements To Participate	BDD Program
Do I have a known separation date?	Yes
How far away is my known separation date?	60 - 180 days
When must I submit my service treatment records to VA?	At the time claim is submitted
When and where must I complete all phases of my VA/DoD medical separation examination process?	At your point of separation, prior to release from the military
When may I apply?	If you meet all of the BDD requirements above, you may apply for BDD 60-180 days prior to separation.

#### How to Apply

To file a pre-discharge claim under BDD, do one of the following:

- Submit your application online using [eBenefits](#) and follow the instructions about where to submit your service treatment records
- Complete the [VA Form 21-526EZ](#), Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits, and submit it with copies of your service treatment records to the [VA location](#) nearest you.
- Call VA toll free at 1-800-827-1000 to have the claim form mailed to you
- Visit your local VA regional office. For the VA regional office nearest you, call VA toll-free at 1-800-827-1000.

#### For More Information

If you are on a military installation, contact your local Transition Assistance Office or ACAP Center (Army only) to schedule appointments to attend VA benefits briefings and learn how to initiate your claim. You can also call the VA toll-free at 1-800-827-1000.

[return to top ▲](#)

#### FAQS

[Status of a pending claim](#)[How much does VA pay in compensation?](#)[More Results](#)

#### RESOURCES

[Advisor Program](#)[Appeals](#)[Benefits A-Z](#)[Federal Benefits Guide](#)[VA Code of Federal Regulations](#)[New/Update Military ID Card](#)

#### CONNECT WITH BENEFITS




 
[SITE MAP \[A-Z\]](#)
[Health](#)
[Benefits](#)
[Burials & Memorials](#)
[About VA](#)
[Resources](#)
[News Room](#)
[Locations](#)
[Contact Us](#)

I AM A...

Select One

[Pre-Discharge](#)
[Compensation](#)
[Compensation Home](#)
[Types of Compensation](#)
[► Types of Claims](#)
[► Evidence Requirements](#)
[Effective Dates](#)
[Claims Process](#)
[Fully Developed Claims](#)
[Apply](#)
[Benefit Rates](#)
[Education & Training](#)
[Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment](#)
[Home Loans](#)
[Life Insurance](#)
[Pension](#)
[Special Groups](#)
[Services](#)
[Applying for Benefits](#)
[Locations](#)
[VBA Claims Transformation](#)
[VBA Performance](#)
[Media and Publications](#)
[About VBA](#)

### CONNECT WITH BENEFITS


[VA](#) » [Veterans Benefits Administration](#) » [Compensation](#) » [Post-Service](#) » Diseases Within One-Year Post-Service

## Compensation

### Diseases Within One-Year Post-Service

VA presumes service connection for certain diseases even though they were not present during military service. Some of these diseases in which presumptive service connection may be granted include hypertension, arthritis, diabetes mellitus, and peptic ulcers. A complete list of diseases is in [Title 38, Code of Federal Regulation, 3.309\(a\)](#).

The post-service disease must be at a compensable degree (i.e., 10% or more disabling) within one year after the date of separation from service, with certain exceptions. The regulation that governs eligible service dates for diseases that occur within one year after separation from service is in Title 38, Code of Federal Regulation, [3.307\(a\)\(2\) and \(a\)\(3\)](#).

### Eligibility Requirements

- You must be a Veteran who was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable.
- You must have a disease that is at least 10% disabling within one year after separation from service
- The disease must be among those listed in [Title 38, Code of Federal Regulation, 3.309\(a\)](#)

Exception: The requirement that the disease must have appeared within one year of separation from service does not apply to the following:

- Hansen's Disease must have appeared within three years after separation.
- Tuberculosis must have appeared within three years after separation.
- Multiple sclerosis must have appeared within seven years after separation.
- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease any time after separation from service

### Evidence Requirements

- The evidence must show that the disease is at least 10 percent disabling. (An example is you're taking medication for hypertension.)
- The evidence must show the disease appeared within the time limits shown above.

### How to Apply

- Apply online using [eBenefits](#), **OR**
- Work with an accredited [representative](#) or [agent](#), **OR**
- Go to a VA regional office and have a VA employee assist you. You can find your regional office on our [Facility Locator](#) page.

For more information on how to apply and for tips on making sure your claim is ready to be processed by VA, visit our [How to Apply](#) page.

[return to top ▲](#)

### FAQS


[Status of a pending claim](#)
[How much does VA pay in compensation?](#)
[More Results](#)

### RESOURCES

[Advisor Program](#)
[Agent and Attorney Fee Coordinators](#)
[Appeals](#)
[Benefits A-Z](#)
[Federal Benefits Guide](#)
[Benefit Rates](#)
[VA Code of Federal Regulations](#)
[New/Update Military ID Card](#)